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2008 State of the County Address
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Good afternoon.

I'd like to welcome all of you – honorable elected officials, distinguished guests, department heads, employees, constituents, members of the business community and media. I am honored to have the privilege of participating in what has become a tradition in Macomb County each spring - the annual State of the County Address.

Thank you to the Macomb County Alliance of Chambers and Citizens First Bank for sponsoring this important event today at Mac & Ray's in Harrison Township. We certainly have an amazing view of one of our most precious assets in Macomb County: Lake St. Clair.

As you all know, this is my second opportunity to deliver this important yearly speech. Last year when I spoke, I had just begun my term as chairman of the Board of Commissioners.

To say the least, it has been quite an interesting year!

Each of the past 365 days has been eventful, educational, enlightening and – at times – excruciating. Most importantly, we have endured and have gained valuable experience.

The task of providing an overview of county activities for the last 12 months that is inclusive and complete is daunting. The scope of what has been achieved is wide and the list of items worthy of recognition is long.

One of the things I learned this last year is that giving lengthy speeches is not easy. And, based on feedback from last year's speech, I learned that they aren't always welcome!

Recognizing this, today I am going to provide a few notable highlights from the past year which will give you an idea of what has been going on in our county. Understand that for the few things that I have the time to mention, there are dozens more.

I will state what I feel to be priorities and mention a few plans I feel should be put in place. These are based upon the unique perspective I have gained from the experience of serving as Macomb's regional ambassador during the past year.

You are all acutely aware that 2007 was one of the hardest years our county has had to endure. We felt the effects of rising health care and retirement costs, funding reductions, stock market volatility and decreasing property values.

We know first-hand what it's like to do more with less.

Those of us in leadership positions know what it's like to make difficult and unpopular budget reduction decisions. The task of balancing our 2008 budget has been challenging and, in some respects, painful.

Elected officials and department heads investigated measures that will provide cost-savings, increased revenues and promote efficiency. We took both innovative and sensible approaches which led us to many successful reductions.

But this year's budget shortfall was ultimately covered when a majority of the Board voted to dip into our county's rainy day fund.

We all know that this is not a permanent solution.

Single-digit increases in revenue cannot offset double-digit increases in health care and retirement. We will continue to be faced with yearly shortfalls until we confront the structural issues which put us in the red. Budget cuts and increased productivity simply cannot keep up with rising expenditures.

Benjamin Franklin once observed, "A small leak can sink a great ship."

Ladies and gentlemen ... we've got a leak and it must be fixed. Put simply, we cannot continue to operate as we have in the past.

The Triple A bond rating we have maintained since 2002 is very important because it saves taxpayers significant interest when debt is incurred for any purpose. That favorable rating was achieved as a result of diligent, responsible financial management. Maintaining it and running county operations within our means must be among the Board's top priorities.

This will require constant effort and more hard work. We must accept that the economic climate has forever changed and there is no going back. We must intuitively anticipate change and turn challenges into opportunities.

Becoming an operationally efficient, lean and flexible organization is a demand that has been faced and met by many businesses and corporations.

Therefore, it makes sense to tap into the knowledge and experience of corporate neighbors who have already navigated these issues. I am now in the process of forming a task force to be made up of experienced, top tier management people from the state's largest corporations.

The group's purpose will be to examine our current operations and provide an objective assessment of the county's existing practices, systems and processes from a private sector viewpoint.

I expect that operational parallels will be found, we will gain valuable insight and what we learn will help us change for the better.

Focus Macomb is a great example of a successful collaboration between the private and public sectors. The group is made up of key business and education leaders and was formed two years ago to provide recommendations to the Board of Commissioners.

Focus Macomb's goal is to help county leadership position Macomb County as a successful competitor in the global economy.

Many of the group's recommendations have already been implemented by our Planning & Economic Development Department and others are in the works.

The Board of Commissioners recognizes the hundreds of hours that have been contributed by the members of Focus Macomb. We appreciate their strategic vision, depth of business experience and commitment to our community.

SEMCOG has an excellent track record of working with groups of communities to stimulate cost-effective government. I plan to tap into the knowledge base at SEMCOG as well. They have pledged to be an active participant in identifying efficiencies and projecting long-term trends which affect Macomb County.

Speaking of trends, did you know that since 2000, Macomb County has added 61,673 residents? Now that's a positive trend! We've all chosen Macomb County because we know it's a great place to live, work and raise our families. And many more people are discovering our desirable quality of life, too.

Our county offers a great balance of attributes which draw people with diverse interests. People want a safe, clean, caring community with economic and cultural opportunities. Macomb County has these and more.

Our population is rapidly approaching a million people, so it is important to help citizens and businesses increase awareness and respect for the broad spectrum of human diversity.

The Macomb County Department of Planning & Economic Development, in partnership with the Macomb County Chamber, has developed a series of diversity brochures. I'm happy to announce that you are the very first group to see the brochures; please pick up a copy in the hallway.

These brochures are the first of their kind in the state and have been applauded by the Michigan Department of Civil Rights.

Let's now take a moment to recognize a person whose name has become synonymous with promoting ethnic and cultural understanding.

A native of Iraq, he came to the United States at a young age. From early on he set a course for achievement which led him to earning a degree in civil engineering. He began selling cars, and eventually formed one of Michigan's largest Ford dealerships.

A long-time Macomb County businessman and activist, he spearheads international delegations and is devoted to community service and diplomacy.

He was most recently one of only five people selected from the entire country to be presented with the first-ever National Award for Citizen Diplomacy during a ceremony at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.

I'd like to present this Declaration of Tribute from the Board of Commissioners to Tarik Daoud.

Tarik, we honor your many achievements and present this as a token of our appreciation for your inspiring work promoting cultural understanding here and around the world.

Diversity is also an important word relative to the evolution of our business base. We recognize the vital importance of diversifying our traditionally automotive focus toward involvement in other industries.

The Planning & Economic Development Department has traveled around the globe to promote new business development in Macomb County.

Our staff has accompanied Macomb County businesses on trade missions coordinated by our Automation Alley partners to Eastern Europe, India and China. They will head back to China and Viet Nam next month and plans for a mission to Brazil are in the works.

We recognize that these types of activities position Macomb County for the future and that we must do what we can to attract, nurture and retain business investment. The Board last year voted to increase staffing of the Planning Department.

This decision has already reaped rewards; the department was directly involved in securing more than \$76 million in new investment last year. That includes more than 600 new and 1,200 retained jobs.

We pledge to continue to devote effort to creating and maintaining an environment which allows businesses to locate, thrive and expand.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Robert Lewis – citizen of the United Kingdom – is here today with us. He is the Director of Jeanie Marshall Foods of West Sussex, England and also has a branch in Bangor, Maine. Bob is interested in expanding his business here. Bob, you won't be sorry to invest in Macomb County.

One of our nation's largest defense contractors announced an expansion last month that will bring new jobs and increased revenue to Macomb County in the coming years.

General Dynamics has committed to a \$10 million expansion project for its Sterling Heights headquarters and another location in Shelby Township. The jobs will bring new revenue into Macomb County and also create approximately 500 new engineering jobs.

This project is the latest example of defense contractors choosing to do business here.

Last November, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation that included \$2 million for a partnership between Automation Alley and the Army's Tank-automotive and Armaments Command.

These two ventures showcase Macomb County's appeal as an attractive place to do business. We have an established skilled workforce in place as well as convenient access to several types of transportation.

While attracting business is a major priority, we feel it is equally as important to help local businesses to develop and grow.

Thanks to Congressman Sander Levin, Macomb County recently received \$282,000 to help fund plans for a new business accelerator. Macomb County has partnered with the Economic Development Coalition of Southeast Michigan to launch the project.

This is the first project of its kind here and it will provide critical services entrepreneurs need to start and grow high demand businesses. Defense and homeland security have been identified as viable growth sectors for us; these will be the focus of the project.

Currently, we are finalizing details with our proposed partner, Oakland University, and look forward to leveraging the institution's vast resources.

Furthermore, we intend to request that the Michigan Legislature create a SmartZone designation – another first for this county – which will assist with continued financing.

Our Small Business & Technology Development Center assists entrepreneurs and small businesses through the steps of becoming established and promoting continued growth.

One of these entrepreneurs, Misty Delegato, owns Relevar Home Care, an in-home nursing business. Misty has worked closely with Macomb's Small Business & Technology Development Center.

When the business was established five years ago, its three employees took care of about 12 clients. Last year Relevar had 200 clients, and they are looking forward to reaching 275 this year. Relevar now employs 80 full- and 40 part-time workers.

The company has been named "Best Small Business" in a statewide award. Misty will receive the award from Governor Jennifer Granholm at an event in East Lansing next month.

Congratulations to Misty Delegato and Relevar.

In an effort to provide for employees and also maximize retention, Relevar and 65 other county businesses have signed on with Macomb Blue.

This county-endorsed program is designed to facilitate affordable health insurance to Macomb County businesses. The program is based on a cost-sharing structure divided equally between the company, employee and Macomb Health Plan.

Informational booklets about Macomb Blue are also available in the hallway.

Macomb Health Plan has two other programs which provide health services to those residents of the county who don't have medical insurance and don't qualify for Medicare, Medicaid or other health insurance programs.

We are working hard to fill in the gaps for residents and to make services and information more accessible.

For example, County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh's mobile offices travel to locations throughout the county so that residents can get help with birth and death certificates, business registrations, marriage licenses, voter registration, real estate deed requests and more at a location that is close to home.

In addition, many services have been made available during evening office hours, through a 24-hour fax-on-demand system and via the Clerk's Office revamped web site.

And if you forget your marriage license on a holiday, Carmella may just show up to deliver it to you herself like she did for a bride-to-be last year on the day after Thanksgiving. Carmella, I hope you were invited to stay for the ceremony!

We are working for and with our residents.

When the state altered the tax reversion laws requiring the Treasurer to foreclose on properties, Ted Wahby and his staff made necessary program adjustments. In the six years of the program the Treasurer's Office has collected a hundred percent of the delinquent taxes and has not had to foreclose on any occupied homes or businesses.

As you can see, we are committed to finding innovative ways deliver services and work with residents.

Unfortunately, many times it's difficult to reach those individuals who are in dire need of services.

We are reaching out to the county's homeless population through the Macomb County Continuum of Care program. The CoC created a Community Connection Day to give homeless or potentially homeless people an opportunity to access services and information. It also provided a way to perform a count of the homeless population.

Last year 1,270 people were homeless and served by emergency shelters in Macomb County. 140 of those served were children.

The CoC coordinates funding and services to assist the homeless population. Last year, \$975,597 in grant funding for homeless programs was brought into Macomb County.

The Macomb County Community Services Agency helped a lot of people through difficult times this last year as well. The numbers are staggering.

Here are just a few examples:

- 74,952 individuals received emergency food from the Macomb Food Program
- 16,270 individuals received food through other agency-sponsored programs

- 8,485 seniors and 480 persons with disabilities received services that helped them continue to live independently
- 27,676 family households received emergency assistance services from our Community Action Centers

Unfortunately, I could go on ... but even taking a quick glimpse at a few of the statistics gives you an accurate picture. Macomb County is working hard to maintain a network of comprehensive educational, economic and social services to residents in need.

There have been a number of new cost-efficient programs implemented over the last year which further improve services and offer additional help to people in need.

Many of the programs came from an idea or suggestion of someone who works for the county.

Macomb County earned 16 best practices awards from the National Association of Counties (NACo) last year. This is the 26th consecutive year that Macomb County ranked first out of all 83 counties in the state of Michigan. We tied for fourth nationally.

Our employees are creative; they work hard and have an amazing ability to pull together in times of need.

A great example of this took place last summer. Employees and the community became aware that funding which had been expected to cover the Department of Senior Services' Grandparents Raising Grandchildren annual camp was no longer available.

Board Vice Chair Dana Camphous-Peterson worked in coordination with several departments to quickly develop and execute a campaign to publicize the need and raise funds.

Employees from every corner of the county organization and people across the community pitched in to help. The fundraising goal was met and surpassed in less than 3 weeks! In fact, enough funds were raised to sustain last year's camp and put a generous amount toward this summer's annual outing.

Macomb County is fortunate indeed to have employees who not only do their jobs with professional skill and efficiency but who go far beyond their job descriptions and office hours to improve our community.

Volunteers throughout the county are also a vital part of our workforce. We depend upon dedicated community volunteers to keep many of our programs rolling.

At the Macomb County Community Services Agency, for instance, volunteers contributed a total of 133,962 hours last year. If we were to attach a minimum wage dollar value to those hours, they would equal an annual time and services donation equivalent to almost a million dollars.

Community volunteers offer their services with no expectations in return. But we are pleased to thank and honor fifty nominated individuals next month at the Board of Commissioners' 19th Annual Volunteer Recognition ceremony.

What a pleasure it is to share good news and to shine a light on their selfless achievements.

I am also pleased to share the good news again that last year's county-wide efforts by medical, governmental, educational and political bodies resulted in Macomb County winning the Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine satellite campus placement.

In a stunningly successful example of bi-partisanship cooperation, all of our county commissioners, legislators, city and township officials wrote letters, passed resolutions, made phone calls and did everything that we, collectively, could think of doing. It was a remarkable success and a real triumph for our county.

The media spotlight shone on Macomb County this past year when the Grant trial captured the attention of the nation. Because of the intense scrutiny and heightened interest surrounding the case, it may have seemed like that was the only thing happening in the county. The fact is, however, that employees and officials involved in this demanding matter handled it right in step with their everyday workload.

There are many who could and should be acknowledged since this case required extra attention, hours and staffing from many departments. However, since our time is limited, I only have time to thank a few specifically and offer a blanket thank you to the rest for our deep appreciation of their efforts.

Many thanks to Sheriff Mark Hackel and his staff and also Prosecutor Eric Smith and his staff for their excellent work and for representing Macomb County positively in a negative situation.

I'd also like to applaud Judge Diane Druzinski for skillfully maintaining order in the court under extraordinary circumstances. I know how difficult that can be.

Macomb County Courts welcomed our newest Judge Sheila Miller to the bench last year and new chief judges in the Circuit and Probate courts - Judge Richard Caretti and Judge Kathryn George.

We're looking forward to their leadership. At the same time, we are grateful for the years of service that Judge Antonio Viviano and Judge Pamela Gilbert O'Sullivan provided in those positions previously. The gavel has been passed into capable hands.

A vigorous, successful Macomb County is vital to the overall success of southeastern Michigan.

Macomb County, in partnership with the State of Michigan, is the first county in the State to have established and completed an interconnected communications system for all police, fire, and EMS agencies in a major urban area.

By providing the infrastructure improvements within the county, we provided an increased capacity and guaranteed portable radio coverage for our first responders.

Since our system is in partnership with the State, we have statewide coverage and interoperability. Other users including the county health department, hospitals, various Public Works Departments and federal agencies have also been added. The whole project came in under budget and ahead of schedule.

Thanks to Congresswoman Candice Miller, Macomb County received \$352,000 in federal funding toward the 800 MHz project earlier this month. With this funding, we will have a hundred percent of all police, fire and EMS agencies on the system, and will begin to migrate the County Road Commission system as well. The money will help local municipalities buy radios, dispatch equipment and control stations so they can be in sync with the county.

The future of the region as a whole depends on cooperative efforts on issues which are important to us all.

Last summer the Board of Commissioners hosted the Tri-County Summit on behalf of Macomb County.

This is an important gathering of regional officials from the state and Macomb, Wayne and Oakland Counties as well as the City of Detroit. The event was paid for entirely by sponsorships; not a single taxpayer dollar was spent.

Two subjects within the broad topic areas of Quality of Life and Water Quality were studied by committees made up of representatives from each of the four entities involved and key business leaders. Final presentations were made at the Summit to 150 key stakeholders.

I am proud to say that this meeting was a huge success. Feedback from the attendees was overwhelmingly positive.

The Tri-County Summit also helped to strengthen relationships with our regional colleagues. Participation in events like the Tri County Summit and other regional forums has been actively pursued during the last year and will continue to be a priority.

We must make sure that Macomb County's position on issues is heard, known and considered with equal weight of neighboring counties. There are weighty concerns looming ahead ... Cobo expansion, zoo funding, regional transportation, roads, renewable energy, environmental conservation and water quality issues just to name a few.

We are all affected by these regional issues and we all have a stake in resolving them. We share the roads, the waterways, the energy sources, and the natural environment. Some of these resources are renewable; some are not. It's in all of our best interests to be conservationists and environmentalists.

Public Works Commissioner Anthony Marrocco last year saw the completion of the highly successful Lake St. Clair Clean Water Initiative. This was a six and a half year, \$81.2 million Macomb County Public Works Office program in St. Clair Shores, Roseville and Eastpointe which will abate water pollution in Lake St. Clair and also helps to prevent basement flooding.

Public Works also has several projects underway which address today's demands for much needed additional sewer capacity as well as allow residents on faulty septic systems to get rid of the old systems and tie in with the new.

The new home of Public Works, on Dunham and North Rose, is the first county government building to "go green."

Among the many environmentally friendly features are a rain garden, bio-swale and porous brick sidewalk. All are designed to prevent storm water from cascading into the Clinton River, thereby preventing soil erosion and sedimentation.

I'd like to thank our state and federal legislators, and Congresswoman Candice Miller and Senator Debbie Stabenow in particular, for their recent environmental advocacy and efforts to secure \$250,000 in funding for Real-Time water quality monitoring for the St. Clair watershed.

Can anyone argue that clean, safe water is not important to them?

Lake St. Clair is the main source of drinking water for millions of Michigan and Canadian citizens.

Ten years ago, the Blue Ribbon Commission for Lake St. Clair identified the need for increased awareness and strategic planning for this vital resource.

Last year I issued a call to form a new incarnation of the Blue Ribbon Commission to follow up on the original group's recommendations. Many people who were prior members remain active and several are new to the group. We have fantastic representation from the United States, Canada and the First Nation.

Three sub-committees were formed. Each worked for several months to put together a set of recommendations which will be presented to the Blue Ribbon Commission as a whole for inclusion in a new report. This report will be presented in the near future but I'll take a moment to provide an exciting announcement.

One of the groundbreaking recommendations which showcases a firm commitment to the long term health and welfare of Lake St. Clair will be the creation of a first-ever "Lake St. Clair International Alliance."

This will be a group comprised of municipal, county, state, tribal, Canadian provincial and federal leadership as well as other key stakeholders who border the lake. The Alliance will be a voluntary, cooperative forum for the sharing of data, regional storm water management planning and for the advancement of strategic goals.

A regional water quality monitoring program has been set in place for the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair which identifies short-term environmental impacts as well as long term trends. This real-time water monitoring technology is state-of-the-art and the first of its kind in North America.

We now know instantly about dangers to drinking water before it gets to the treatment plant. This will allow us to issue warning alerts downstream.

There will be a coordination of international information which will lead to joint enforcement of water quality violations and the reporting of pollution incidents. A clear identification of the responsible entities for enforcement on both sides of the border and active communication between agencies is critically necessary and will be a priority.

This is merely a hint of what's to come.

The St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair are valuable resources that the people of Michigan and Ontario have the advantage to possess. With real value comes the real responsibility to protect and preserve.

We are privileged to live in the midst of great natural beauty, in a place with wonderful opportunities, and in a generous community of hard-working people. It is no accident that Macomb County is such a desirable place to live...we work hard to make it that way.

From the simplest good deed of extending a helping hand to a neighbor to the construction of a 21st century children's hospital, people work together ... play together ... and serve our community together because that's the way we are in Macomb County.

We share each other's joys, celebrate each other's triumphs, lend a hand in times of need, and always look to the future for better days ahead.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize the men and women in military service who are fighting for a better future here and around the world. We appreciate their commitment and honor them for their bravery and sacrifices.

Please share a moment of silence in remembrance of those who made the ultimate sacrifice and will never come back home.

There is no doubt these are challenging times and many issues and problems vie for our attention on a daily basis. Our county, our state and indeed the entire nation is in the midst of transformation.

But part of what makes our community strong enough to succeed and lead in these trying times is the level of determination and dedication of our countywide elected officials, our department heads, and our employees and union leadership.

We have made great progress but recognize that it *is* a work in progress.

We will work *together* and put the county's interests first.

We will meet the challenges of today to make a better tomorrow.
